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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TEL AVIV 002042

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: COGAT SAYS UNRWA-IDF CONTAINER DISPUTE MAY BE SOON
RESOLVED

REF: TEL AVIV 1911

Classified By: Pol/C Norm Olsen, per 1.4(b) and (d).

1. (C) Summary: UNRWA April 1 announced the suspension of its emergency food distribution program in the Gaza Strip. UNRWA Deputy Director of Operations in Gaza, Krister Nordahl confirmed to Poloff April 2 that UNRWA, frustrated by what it sees as the IDF's refusal to find any interim measures to check outgoing shipping containers (reftel), refused in turn to import more food to replace now-exhausted stocks until the problem is resolved. The IDF has blocked all containers leaving Gaza since two suicide bombers used a hidden compartment in a container to smuggle themselves out of Gaza and into Ashdod, killing 10 Israelis. COGAT representative Daniel Beaudoin assured ECON/C the evening of April 1 and again on April 2, however, that the IDF's new security systems would be in place o/a April 4 at the Karni Crossing, thus allowing at least some of UNRWA's empty containers to exit the Gaza Strip and the food program to re-start. Although differences remain between the two sides as to the number of containers that will be allowed, at least initially, out through Karni, if the COGAT date of April 4 is met, the negative impact of the suspension on beneficiaries should be minimal. End Summary.

UNRWA Suspends Food Program in Gaza

2. (C) UNRWA announced April 1 the suspension of its emergency food aid program in the Gaza Strip due to the GOI's continuing refusal to allow the movement of empty shipping containers out of Gaza. The problem, which had been building since two Gaza suicide bombers smuggled themselves into Ashdod port March 14 and killed 10 Israelis, came to a head March 26 when UN agencies first went public (reftel). A series of discussions between GOI and UNRWA officials the week of March 29 failed to resolve the issue, according to Krister Nordahl, UNRWA Deputy Director of Operations in Gaza. Nordahl confirmed to Poloff April 2 that, although the IDF will/will allow UNRWA food containers to be shipped into Gaza, the IDF (citing the double suicide bombing at Ashdod) was still not/not allowing any containers -- empty or otherwise -- to be shipped back out until improved security measures are in place at Karni Terminal and IDF staff receive the appropriate training in their use. Nordahl said that, in light of the IDF's position and the demurrage charges accruing from blocked containers, UNRWA had no choice but to cease imports.

Situation Not Yet Catastrophic, and Might be Resolved Soon

3. (C) Nordahl explained, however, that not all 600,000 UNRWA emergency food beneficiaries (128,000 families) would be affected immediately. The food distribution cycle rotates over a 45-day period; those who received their food parcels in the last cycle would be fine for the next 45 days. Furthermore, Nordahl said he had been told the evening of April 1 by COGAT that the GOI expected to have the improved systems in place o/a April 4, after which five shipping containers per day could exit through Karni. The program requires the importation, however, of 20 containers (250 tons of foodstuff) per day to meet beneficiaries' needs.

COGAT Working to Fix the Problem

4. (C) Daniel Beaudoin, head of the COGAT's Foreign Relations Branch, confirmed to ECON/C on April 1 that the IDF was hoping to have new security systems in place at Karni within days and that the IDF is in the process of training personnel to screen the empty containers. When ECON/C contacted Beaudoin again April 2, he said the new screening would definitely begin Sunday, April 4. He said he did not know how many containers would be released per day, but insisted "it would be more than five." Beaudoin acknowledged that UNRWA needed the release of 20 containers per day to do its job adequately.

Comment

15. (C) UNRWA has drawn the battle lines clearly on this issue and is holding firm in its position vis-a-vis the IDF: no new containers to go in until the IDF lets the empties out. UNRWA was frustrated by what it saw as the IDF's refusal to find any interim measures, such as visual inspection of the simple plate steel containers. By going public and increasing the pressure, UNRWA clearly hopes to force the GOI to act, and may have at least partially accomplished this if COGAT's assurances to us are any indication. UNRWA seems satisfied -- for the moment -- with COGAT's assurance that the containers will begin moving no later than April 4, and thus the negative impact on beneficiaries will be relatively small. If that date should slip or the number of shipping containers remains severely limited, however, that negative impact would rapidly increase.

16. (U) UNRWA Press Release.

Begin Text of UNRWA April 1 Press Release:

UNRWA suspends emergency food aid to Gaza

Gaza - The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) today stopped distributing emergency food aid to some 600,000 refugees in the Gaza Strip, or approximately half of the refugees receiving UNRWA food aid in the occupied Palestinian territory, following restrictions introduced by Israeli authorities at the sole commercial crossing through which the Agency is able to bring in humanitarian assistance. Stocks of rice, flour, cooking oil and other essential foodstuffs that UNRWA provides to refugees reduced to poverty, or otherwise affected by a humanitarian crisis now in its 42nd month, have been fully depleted.

Efforts to persuade the Israeli authorities to lift the restriction on the transport of UNRWA's empty food containers out of Gaza have so far failed, forcing the Agency to suspend the delivery into Gaza of 11,000 tons of food from Ashdod port to avoid a bottleneck which would result in prohibitive costs. Under normal circumstances, UNRWA delivers some 250 tons of food per day in Gaza alone as part of a wider program of emergency assistance to refugees, initiated shortly after the outbreak of strife in the West Bank and Gaza Strip in September 2000. Since then, the Gaza Strip has been locked into a deep socio-economic crisis resulting from the prolonged closure of its border with Israel, the destruction of thousands of homes as well as of agricultural and local industrial assets. Almost two out of three households in Gaza live below the poverty line, and more than half its work force is unemployed.

UNRWA is not alone in facing chronic obstacles to the flow of humanitarian assistance. These have been experienced by all UN agencies operating in the West Bank and Gaza, whose Agency heads in a joint statement on March 26 called, without success, on the GOI to loosen the restrictions currently in force in Gaza.

UNRWA Commissioner-General Peter Hansen said: "The suspension of UNRWA's emergency food aid in the Gaza Strip will further distress communities already struggling to cope with unrelieved economic hardship and malnutrition. If the new restrictions in Gaza continue, I fear we could see real hunger emerge for the first time in two generations. Israel's legitimate, and serious, security concerns will not be served by hindering the emergency relief work of the United Nations. I appeal to the authorities to lift these restrictions and enable us to resume our food distributions in Gaza."

End text of UNRWA press release.

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